

Cricket 80

Chapter 80

The IPL had ended, but the echoes of the season still resonated in my mind. Emerging as one of the standout players, I had every reason to feel proud. Social media had erupted with fan pages, edits, and praise from cricket enthusiasts across the globe. It was surreal seeing my name trending among cricket discussions, and it fueled my belief that this was only the beginning of my journey.

Back home, I resumed training with renewed vigor. The dream was clear—I wanted to don the Indian jersey and represent my country at the highest level. I poured every ounce of energy into perfecting my game, ensuring that my batting, bowling, and fielding were sharp enough to withstand any challenge. In the nets, I visualized facing international bowlers, the likes of Jofra Archer and Mark Wood, imagining the rush of playing in England's legendary stadiums.

As days turned into weeks, speculation about India's squad for the England tour began swirling. The series included three ODIs, three T20s, and five Test matches—a grueling schedule that would test every player's mettle. Pundits debated squad selections, and fans clamored for their favorite players to make the cut. My name began cropping up in discussions about new talent, and it was a thrill to hear experts suggest that I might be among the next batch of young stars to break into the team.

One evening, as I scrolled through my social media feed, I stumbled upon a fan edit that sent chills down my spine. It was a compilation of my IPL highlights—those searing yorkers, the blazing fastest fifty, and the celebratory roars after taking crucial wickets. The caption read: "Future of Indian Cricket: Aarav Pathak." My heart swelled with pride and anticipation. Could this really be happening?

As the announcement day drew closer, the nervous energy was palpable. I tried to keep myself occupied—training harder than ever, spending time with family, and even catching up with old friends. But the thought of the squad list loomed large in my mind.

Finally, the day arrived. I woke up early, my heart thudding as I checked the news every few minutes. Social media was abuzz with excitement, and I felt like the entire cricketing world was holding its breath. Then came the notification: "BCCI Announces Squad for England Tour."

I clicked the link, my hands trembling slightly. Scanning through the names, I saw the usual stars—Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah. My eyes darted through the list of all-rounders and bowlers, searching for one name—mine. But as I reached the end, my heart sank. My name wasn't there.

For a moment, I couldn't process it. I reread the list, hoping I'd missed something. But the reality was undeniable—I hadn't been picked.

The disappointment was like a punch to the gut. I had done everything I could, given my best in the IPL, and proved my mettle. Yet, it wasn't enough. Questions began swirling in my mind. What more could I have done? Why wasn't I chosen? Was I not good enough?

But amidst the initial wave of disappointment, a small voice in my head reminded me of something important. This wasn't the end. This was a setback, yes, but setbacks were a part of every cricketer's journey. Virat Kohli had faced rejection early in his career. MS Dhoni had to work his way up through countless domestic games. If they could overcome their struggles, so could I.

In the following days, I channeled my frustration into my practice sessions. I spent hours in the nets, working on every aspect of my game. I analyzed my performances, identifying areas where I could improve. Bowling coach's advice gave me tips on refining my line and length, while batting coach Vikram Rathour helped me work on my footwork against swing bowling—a crucial skill for playing in English conditions.

Social media continued to buzz with support from fans. Messages poured in, urging me to stay strong and not give up. "Aarav, you're our hero! Your time will come!" one fan wrote. Another said, "Keep pushing, Aarav. We believe in you." Their faith in me was a powerful motivator, reminding me that I wasn't alone in this journey.

Meanwhile, the Indian team departed for England. Watching them board the flight, clad in their blue blazers, stirred a mix of emotions within me. I wanted to be there with them, walking onto the field at Lord's or The Oval, representing my country. But instead of letting the disappointment consume me, I resolved to work even harder. If not now, then someday.

Late at night, after a rigorous day of training, I often sat with my notebook, jotting down goals and strategies. Play for India within the next year. Score a century in my debut series. Take a five-wicket haul in my first Test. These dreams were my guiding light, driving me to push past the disappointment and keep striving for greatness.

One evening, as I scrolled through social media, I saw a post that reignited the fire within me. It was a quote from Sachin Tendulkar: "When people throw stones at you, turn them into milestones." It was exactly what I needed to hear.

The road ahead was clear—I would turn this setback into a stepping stone, a milestone in my journey toward becoming the cricketer I aspired to be.

The Irani Cup had always been a stage for upcoming players to prove their mettle. After my recent IPL success and the setback of not making it to the Indian squad for the England tour, this tournament became my new battleground. It was my chance to showcase my skills and remind everyone why I

belonged on the international stage. This year's match was Rest of India versus Vidarbha, held at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur. The venue was buzzing with excitement as cricket enthusiasts from all over the country gathered to watch the clash.

When the squad list was announced, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. Being named in the playing XI alongside stalwarts like Karun Nair, Mayank Agarwal, R Ashwin, Jayant Yadav, and my friends Prithvi Shaw and Navdeep Saini was an honor. I was determined to make the most of this opportunity.

Match day arrived, and the air was electric. Vidarbha won the toss and chose to bowl first. As the Rest of India team padded up, there was an air of quiet determination in our dressing room. Karun Nair, our captain, gave us a motivational talk, reminding us of the importance of patience and resilience in a five-day game.

Prithvi Shaw and Mayank Agarwal were our openers. As they walked out to bat, we all settled in to watch the start of the game. However, it was a shaky start for us. In the very first over, Mayank was dismissed for a duck, nicking a sharp delivery to the slip cordon. The Vidarbha players erupted in celebration, and we felt the pressure mounting early.

"You're up, Aarav," Karun said, clapping me on the back.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed my MRF bat and adjusted my gloves. As I walked out to the middle, the crowd's cheers and the bright sunlight made everything feel surreal. This was my first game in the Irani Cup, and I wanted to make it count.

Vidarbha's bowlers were relentless from the get-go. The pitch had a hint of moisture, offering some early movement. Their pacer Umesh Yadav, who had also represented India, bowled with raw pace and precision. His first delivery to me was a fiery bouncer that whizzed past my helmet.

"Nice one, Umesh!" one of the slip fielders chirped.

I smiled under my helmet, nodding to myself. This is going to be a battle.

The next ball was pitched up, and I drove it straight down the ground. The ball raced to the boundary, drawing cheers from our dugout. "Shot, Aarav!" Prithvi called from the other end, raising his bat slightly in appreciation.

The initial nerves faded as I began finding the middle of the bat. Prithvi, on the other hand, was playing his usual aggressive game, driving and cutting with precision. Together, we started rebuilding the innings, rotating the strike and punishing the loose balls.

Umesh, however, wasn't one to back down. His consistent line and length made it hard for us to score freely. I respected the good deliveries, focusing on keeping my wicket intact while capitalizing on anything slightly off target.

"Stay focused," Prithvi said during one of the overs. "We need to bat long."

We brought up our fifty-run partnership, and the applause from the dressing room gave us a boost. However, the joy was short-lived as Prithvi mistimed a pull shot off a short ball, handing an easy catch to mid-wicket. He walked back disappointed, having scored 89 in 253 balls.

Karun Nair joined me at the crease, and we continued the fight. The Vidarbha spinners were introduced into the attack, and they bowled with precision, exploiting the rough patches on the pitch. Their captain, Faiz Fazal, set attacking fields, placing catchers around the bat to put pressure on us.

Facing the spinners was challenging, but I relied on my footwork and timing to counter them. A lofted shot over long-on for six against Akshay Wakhare was particularly satisfying, breaking the shackles and showing intent.

Karun played a composed innings, anchoring from one end while I kept the scoreboard ticking. Together, we stitched another crucial partnership, bringing stability to our innings.

During a drinks break, Ashwin walked up to me and said, "Keep playing like this, Aarav. Build your innings. You're looking solid out there." His words of encouragement boosted my confidence.

I reached my half-century with a flick off my pads, and the cheers from the crowd made it a moment to remember. I raised my bat, acknowledging the applause, but I knew the job was far from done.

The match entered its second phase with a spectacular display of batting prowess from the Rest of India team. Over the course of two and half days, we crafted a batting masterclass, building an imposing total of 800 runs. It was an innings filled with grit, patience, and flashes of brilliance that defined our resolve to dominate Vidarbha.

My innings of 339 runs in 409 balls was the centerpiece of this marathon effort. From the very first ball, I felt in control, threading gaps with precision and dispatching loose deliveries to the boundary. The pitch had eased out considerably, and with every passing session, I grew more confident. I partnered effectively with Karun Nair and Hanuma Vihari, who played sublime innings of 187 and 120, respectively. Together, we frustrated the Vidarbha bowlers, pushing them to their limits as they tried to find ways to break through.

The runs flowed steadily, and my shots echoed around the stadium, drawing cheers from the crowd. A pull shot for six off a short ball from Umesh Yadav stands out as a personal highlight, a statement of intent that reverberated across the ground.

The milestones came and went, and the joy of reaching my maiden triple century was unparalleled. As I raised my bat to acknowledge the standing ovation, I felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. The captain and teammates clapped from the dugout, and for a moment, I allowed myself to soak it all in.

Eventually, after two grueling days of batting, we declared at 800 runs, setting a formidable challenge for Vidarbha. The total was a testament to the strength and depth of our batting lineup, with contributions coming from almost everyone in the team.

Vidarbha's response was spirited but ultimately fell short of matching our dominance. They put up a decent total of 410 runs, with their middle order showing resilience. I had the opportunity to contribute with the ball, picking up 4 crucial wickets, while Ashwin showcased his class with 3 wickets of his own.

My first breakthrough came in the form of their opener, a sharply turning delivery that clipped his off-stump. Later, I dismissed their skipper Faiz Fazal with a flighted ball that trapped him in front. The Vidarbha players showed flashes of defiance, but our bowlers kept chipping away, ensuring they couldn't build partnerships of significant impact.

With a lead of 390 runs and only a day and a half left, our strategy for the second innings was clear: bat fast and set an unassailable target. Mayank Agarwal led the charge, scoring a quickfire 50 off just 87 balls, delighting the crowd with his elegant stroke play. Prithvi Shaw, despite his usual attacking mindset, fell early for 29, leaving the responsibility to me once again.

Determined to capitalize on the situation, I played with a mix of aggression and caution, racing to 93 runs off just 79 balls. It was a whirlwind knock filled with crisp boundaries and towering sixes, aimed at putting the game beyond Vidarbha's reach. However, just as I neared another century, I was caught in the deep while attempting to accelerate further.

After my dismissal, Karun declared the innings, leaving Vidarbha with a monumental target and just over a day to survive.

The final day was a test of patience and resilience for both sides. Vidarbha, knowing the game was beyond their grasp, dug in to force a draw. Their batsmen showed remarkable determination, blocking everything that came their way and frustrating our bowlers. Despite Ashwin's guile and my efforts to break through, they batted the entire day, grinding the match to a stalemate.

As the sun set on the final day, and the game ended in a draw, there was a mix of emotions in our camp. While we couldn't secure an outright win, the match was a testament to the spirit of Test cricket. My 339 runs, combined with contributions from the team, stood out as one of the highlights of the game.

Walking off the field, I felt a sense of pride and determination. This match was another step in my journey, a reminder of the heights I could reach with hard work and perseverance. The Irani Cup had given me the platform I needed to showcase my talent, and I was ready to take on whatever challenges came next.

The Duleep Trophy journey began with a sense of anticipation and responsibility as I joined India Blue. It was another platform to prove my mettle, and I was determined to leave a mark. The team had some seasoned players, but the excitement of being in such a high-stakes competition overshadowed any nerves.

In our first match, India Blue faced India Green. Batting first, I couldn't contribute much in the first innings, managing only 3 runs before falling to a sharp delivery. It was disappointing, but I knew there was more to come. In the second innings, I regained my rhythm, scoring a steady 57 runs, anchoring the middle order. Despite my efforts, the match ended in a draw, with both teams unable to force a result on a pitch that refused to deteriorate.

The second match against India Red was another intense affair. This time, I was more prepared to capitalize on my opportunities. In the first innings, I scored a well-compiled 87 runs, showing grit and determination against a disciplined bowling attack. The innings was a mix of patience and calculated aggression, and it gave me confidence heading into the second innings.

In the second innings of the same match, I played one of the most memorable knocks of my domestic career. A marathon effort of 253 runs in 441 balls showcased my ability to adapt to various conditions and bowlers. The pitch was flat, but their bowlers tried everything in their arsenal—pace, spin, reverse swing—but I held firm. Boundaries flowed freely, and the occasional six added flair to my innings. I was particularly pleased with how I rotated the strike, ensuring no bowler settled into a rhythm. Despite my heroics, the match also ended in a draw due to a lack of time to push for a result.

The stage was set for the final—a showdown between India Blue and India Red. This match was the ultimate test of endurance, skill, and strategy. India Blue batted first, and I walked into the middle with the determination to set a solid foundation for our team. My 130 runs in the first innings were a perfect blend of artistry and resilience. Every shot I played felt like it was destined to find the boundary, and the support from my teammates only added to the momentum.

Apart from my batting, I also made an impact with the ball, taking two crucial wickets in the first innings. Bowling in a final brought a different kind of pressure, but I thrived on it, focusing on variations and line-and-length to outsmart the batsmen.

In the second innings, we needed quick runs to put India Red under pressure. I contributed 48 runs in rapid time, playing my part in accelerating the scoring rate. The bowlers had a challenging task ahead of them, but I was ready to shoulder the responsibility.

When it was our turn to bowl in the second innings, I delivered one of the best spells of my career, picking up 5 wickets. Every wicket felt like a step closer to victory, and the energy on the field was electric. My deliveries had a mix of flight and spin that baffled their batsmen, and the fielders backed me up with sharp catches and stops.

As the final wicket fell, a wave of jubilation swept through our camp. We had won the Duleep Trophy, and the victory felt like the culmination of all the hard work and sacrifices we had made throughout the tournament. The team celebrated together, and lifting the trophy was a surreal moment.

This journey through the Duleep Trophy wasn't just about the runs or wickets; it was about growth, resilience, and proving to myself that I belonged on such a stage. It was a chapter in my cricketing career that I would always cherish, a reminder of what passion and persistence could achieve.